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# **Prospects for Local Collaboration into an Uncertain Future: Learning from Practice within Labour's Partnership Paradigm**

IAIN LINDSEY Department of Sport and Physical Activity, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

## **ABSTRACT**

Achieving effective local collaboration, a strong theme of the previous Labour government, may actually become more important given Coalition government policies emphasising decentralisation and encouraging alternative providers of public services. Therefore, it remains essential to learn from experiences of collaboration especially as, despite significant research, few studies explicitly identify guidance for improving this practice that is of specific relevance to local policy actors. In order to do so, a decentred and ethnographic approach was adopted to examine collaboration in a case study of a Sport and Physical Activity Alliance in Casetown, a medium-sized city in the south of England. Findings from this case study reinforced those found in other studies that pointed to the constraints of targets imposed by the Labour government, ingrained approaches to public administration and lack of open acknowledgement of power differentials impeding the development of effective collaboration. Drawing on the suggestions of those involved in the alliance, an alternative vision of collaboration is advocated, focused on shared learning and bottom-up implementation within more fluid and open structures in which there would be greater scope for the exercise of agency on behalf of those individuals and organisations involved. As during the period of the Labour government, aspects of current wider policy agendas may impede as well as support the development of this alternative vision of collaboration. Nevertheless, it is argued that reflexive local actors may collectively be able to address the contextual challenges that exist in order to develop more effective forms and practices of collaboration.

**KEY WORDS:** Public service partnerships, local collaboration, decentred approach, sport, health, Coalition government

## **Introduction**

The practice of collaboration is widely prevalent and important in contributing to public policy-making and implementation (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). While forms of collaboration have become ubiquitous in many different countries (Sullivan 2010), governmental impetus encouraging collaboration has been particularly strong in the United Kingdom (Wang 2011). The Labour government, in power from 1997-2010, promoted collaboration through institutionalising partnerships as one of the key components of their broader agenda to 'modernise' public services (Stoker 2004). Dickinson and Glasby (2010, p. 812) explain the prioritisation of collaboration as being a response to the 'fragmentation caused by market reforms in public services'.

Moreover, collaboration was also more positively and variously viewed as a way in which services could be provided more efficiently, as improving governance through enabling the involvement of citizens and non-state agencies in the policy process and as a means to address longstanding and complex social problems (Sullivan 2010). These aspirational possibilities of collaboration were especially pertinent at local levels (Davies 2009) and were pursued with gusto by both central government and local policy actors.

Given the magnitude of the aspirations that were ascribed to collaboration, it is perhaps unsurprising that researchers have been critical regarding the outcomes of collaboration in practice. Dickinson and Glasby (2010, p. 813) describe the collective evidence of collaborative impact as 'ambiguous'. Perkins et al. (2010, p. 113) provide an example of a more negative appraisal in reviewing the available evidence within the public health sector which suggests that collaboration within partnerships has had 'only a marginal impact ... hav[ing] failed or at least fallen short of expectations'. That these judgements remain somewhat equivocal is a reflection of methodological difficulties and an associated lack of research on the outcomes of collaboration (Sullivan 2010). Instead, collaboration structures and processes are considered to a far greater extent in the significant body of research literature that has emerged over the last decade (Glasby et al. 2010). Nevertheless, even this literature largely does not provide substantial guidance or learning that could be widely beneficial to enable policy-makers and practitioners to improve collaboration (Dickinson and Glasby 2010, McGuire and Agranoff 2011). This limitation is all the more galling as, despite the indications of lack of impact and the possibility that collaboration 'fatigue' (Diamond 2006) developed through the period of the Labour government, 'policy makers and professionals remain so attached to [collaboration] as an idea' (Sullivan 2010, p. 19).

The importance of learning from collaboration practices over the period of the Labour government is heightened when the early policy trajectory of the Coalition government is taken into account. On the one hand, it could be easy to question the continued relevance of collaboration given that it has received little specific impetus from the Coalition government and austerity measures have resulted in the withdrawal of funding for some nationwide systems of partnerships instigated by the Labour government in various policy sectors (Laffin et al. 2011). The expansion of market-based approaches to the operation of public services also has the potential to impede collaborative efforts. On the other hand, policy approaches associated with austerity measures have emphasised localism and decentralisation. Such policies often have a 'distinctly collective' (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012) focus on empowering communities to have greater influence over decisions affecting them, an aim which is entirely in line with the specific collaboration discourse that emphasises the potential of this practice to enable a more open policy process (Sullivan 2010). Furthermore, plans to 'open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies' (Cameron 2010) have been advanced in a

number of different sectors such as education and health. Doing so is likely to increase fragmentation within local provision, a problem for which collaboration has been viewed as a solution. As such, Lowdnes and Pratchett (2012) argue that that the successful pursuit of some Coalition policies is 'arguably dependent' on collaboration between local authorities and other local agencies. That Coalition policies may serve to both encourage and inhibit collaboration, as also recognised by Sullivan (2010), only enhances the importance of learning from prior experience to improve collaborative practice into the future.

In order to contribute to such learning, this article considers the experiences and practices of collaboration in a case study partnership in Casetown, a medium-sized city in the south of England. The partnership was one of a number of Sport and Physical Activity Alliances (SPAAs) that were instigated across England as part of the broader instigation of a modernised 'delivery system' for sport. This delivery system was designed to connect national, regional and local organisations involved in, or with an interest in, sport. Overall, the delivery system had twin aims to increase participation in sport and active recreation and to develop pathways through which young people could progress in sport (Sport England 2005). As the most local component of this Delivery System, SPAAs were expected to contribute to these aims through 'successfully coordinat[ing] opportunities for sport and active recreation in the local area by providing effective leadership' (Sport England 2007). Each SPAA was to be geographically aligned with a particular local authority area (or part thereof) with members drawn from across different sectors including sport, health and education (Sport England 2007). Furthermore, SPAAs were expected to link with another key component of Labour's partnership infrastructure, namely Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) (Sport England 2005). As with LSPs (Perkins et al. 2010), SPAAs were also to be integrated into Labour's systems of local performance management through being identified as the key 'mechanism for delivery against ... developing LAA targets' where they related to sport and physical activity (Sport England 2005, p. 10).

Beyond the field of sport, the extent to which the context of Casetown SPAA replicated the conditions found in other policy sectors increases its potential value to learning about collaboration more generally. Sport and physical activity has been an increasingly salient issue for government (Houlihan and Lindsey 2012) especially in light of concerns about the 'wicked issue' of obesity and the potential health benefits of participation in sport and physical activity (Collins and Green 2009). This increasing salience meant that the sport policy sector was subject to Labour's broader modernisation agenda (Houlihan and Green 2009), which included both the promotion of partnerships and performance management approaches that can be identified in the instigation of SPAAs and their systems of funding and governance, as described above. These associations between sport, the specific case study and wider policies serve to emphasise the argument made by Grix (2010, p. 127) that studies of sport have the potential to 'shed light on many features of politics'.

Nevertheless, this potential has been by no means realised. While issues of governmental modernisation have been largely studied at a national level within sport (for example, Houlihan and Green 2009, Green 2009), there has been less research at sub-national levels. Grix and colleagues examine governance issues in relation to County Sport Partnerships, the organisational form directly above SPAAAs in the delivery system hierarchy. In a number of articles based on a limited number of interviews across three case study County Sport Partnerships, these authors demonstrate the continuing hierarchical power that government can exert over local partnerships (Grix 2010, Philpotts et al. 2011, Grix and Philpotts 2010, Goodwin and Grix 2011). In the only other UK-based study of local sport governance and partnerships of note, Lindsey (2010) considers the effectiveness of tools by which national agencies can steer local partnerships. This article seeks to add to these examples in contributing to broader understanding and learning about collaboration through the examination of Casetown SPAA.

In doing so, the arguments in this article will be developed as follows. The next section will present the overall decentred approach adopted for the study, the broader conceptualisation of the relationship between structure and agency that underpinned this approach and the actual data collection and analysis undertaken. Empirical findings from the case study will then be presented in two sections. Linking the findings from Casetown SPAA to other exemplar studies on collaboration and partnership, the argument will be made in the first of these sections that collaboration was constrained by nationally imposed targets, the ongoing inculcation and adoption of public administration approaches associated with new public management and a lack of open discussion of power relationships. The second empirical section will then consider the possibilities for future improvement of collaboration within the Casetown SPAA through developing more fluid and open structures for collaboration within which there would be more scope for the bottom-up development of shared learning and consensual implementation. Further consideration of the potential for wider adoption of such a model of collaboration in the context of Coalition policies will then be presented in the final concluding section.

## **Methodology**

Following Davies' (2009) recommendation for research into collaboration, a decentred approach was adopted for the study of collaboration within the Casetown SPAA. The decentred approach has largely been advocated and explained by Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006) and, as a result, has become 'one of the most substantive and innovative recent additions to British political science literature' (McAnulla 2006, p. 113). The relevance of such an approach to this study can be identified through the following explanation by Bevir and Richards (2009a, p. 4) in which the specific term 'collaboration' could readily be inserted in place of the more general term, 'practice':

*To decenter is to focus on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings. It is to unpack a practice in terms of the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals.*

Not only is the interpretation of meanings and actions key to the decentred approach but also the 'ways in which individuals create, sustain and modify social life, institutions and policies' through their actions (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 98). Therefore, the value of the decentred approach for a study such as this which sought to learn from the practice of collaboration was its emphasis on obtaining a detailed understanding of the different perspectives of the variety of individuals involved in the SPAA.

While the previous quotation indicates recognition that actors and their actions influence their broader environment, the close association of the decentred approach with interpretivism has led to criticisms that it encourages insufficient heed to be paid to structural influences on individuals' actions (McAnulla 2006, Goodwin and Grix 2010). Such a critique is not necessarily consistent with Bevir and Richards' (2009a, p. 9) explanation of the decentred approach as one which 'defends the capacity for agency while recognizing that it occurs within a social context that influences it'. Similarly, Davies (2009, p. 93) argues that a decentred approach 'can contribute to both agent and structure-centered explanations, revealing much about how actors cope with circumstances not of their own making and generating insights into the day-to-day production and reproduction of political power'. The potential to examine the interaction of structure and agency through adopting a decentred approach is particularly relevant in the case study of a SPAA that was part of the broader delivery system structure but whose members were, in rhetoric at least, provided with a degree of flexibility (Sport England 2007).

As a result of this research focus and given the cited critique of the decentred approach, it is particularly important to clarify the assumptions underpinning this study with regard to the relationship between structure and agency. In this regard, it is important that Bevir and Richards (2009b) identify that the decentred approach is congruent with Hay's (2002) explanation of the 'strategic relational approach' to addressing the structure-agency issue. Hay cites Jessop (1996) in trying to dissolve what he sees as the unnecessary separation of structure from agency. In doing so, he refines the terminology to situate strategic actors within strategically selective contexts. For Hay (2002), it is a strategic actor's explicit and implicit perceptions of the strategically selective context that influences the orientation of their actions towards achieving particular outcomes. In turn, the strategically selective context 'favours certain strategies over others as means to realize a given set of intentions or preferences' and may, in fact, mitigate against the possibility that particular intentions can be achieved (Hay 2002, p. 129). What is also important here is to avoid artificially reifying structures (Marsh 2008), and it is for this reason that this study was not limited by the choice of a specific theoretical position. Rather, recent

empirically based literature on partnership and collaboration in the UK was used throughout the study to sensitise the researcher to potential facets of the broader strategically selective context. Moreover, the use of the literature supported analysis of the extent to which the features of, and learning from, this case study may have wider applicability.

In line with the decentred approach and in order to understand the meanings that guided collaborative behaviour within the Casetown SPAA, a research design based on ethnography was enacted (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Access was negotiated with the chair of the SPAA on the basis that the research was utilised to improve collaborative practice. Consent was gained from all members of the SPAA on condition that a pseudonym would be used for the SPAA in any dissemination and individuals would be anonymised as far as possible. Data collection consisted of an iterative and complementary process of observation, interviews and documentary analysis conducted over a period of more than one year from January 2009 to April 2010. During this period, seven meetings of SPAA members were observed and detailed notes were taken at each meeting. One of these meetings offered the researcher the opportunity to disseminate and discuss initial findings of the research with SPAA members and the penultimate meeting was a wider day-long event designed to 'refresh' the operation of the SPAA. Observation of all meetings allowed the researcher to gain understanding of the 'dynamics of actual deliberations [and] the structure of processes' that Innes and Booher (2010, p. 41) suggest are seldom captured yet may be 'essential if we are to advance either [collaboration] practice or theory'.

Observations from initial meetings informed a series of eight semi-structured interviews with SPAA members. Interviewees were purposively selected to reflect the diversity of SPAA members and included those that were active within the SPAA to varying degrees, members from both public and voluntary sector organisations, members from different policy areas and those in leadership roles in the SPAA. Some interviewees welcomed the opportunity to speak about their experiences in the SPAA to a researcher who they regarded as independent yet familiar from interactions at SPAA meetings. As well as discussing issues identified in meeting observations, topics covered in interviews included interviewees' own involvement in the SPAA, their perspectives on the aims, organisation and dynamics of collaboration within the SPAA as well as the wider context within which the SPAA operated. Interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes and were recorded and transcribed in full. Besides interviews, the researcher also had access to all SPAA documents which included meeting minutes, draft and final SPAA strategies and a number of position papers and reports.

Data from all three sources were analysed through a continual and inductive process (Fielding and Thomas 2008, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Data were classified into themes and sub-themes as they were collected as well as being considered in

relation to the broader contextualising literature (Yin 2009). As new data resulted in further themes and sub-themes being identified, previously analysed data were recoded (Fielding and Thomas 2008). Importantly, feedback gained from disseminating initial research findings within an SPAA meeting was subsequently fed back into the analysis process (Durose 2009).

## **Features and approaches of Casetown SPAA**

Casetown SPAA was initiated in 2008. The membership of the SPAA was drawn from a range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. However, this formal membership masked the differing levels of involvement and influence that different organisations and individuals had within the SPAA. The chair of the SPAA was a member of academic staff at a local university. However, similar to some LSPs (Rowe 2006), leadership within the SPAA was mainly provided by the local authority (Casetown City Council). A number of representatives from the local authority's sport and recreation section were members of the SPAA and undertook both administrative and practical activities on its behalf. Staff from Casetown Primary Care Trust (PCT) with responsibility for health promotion were also well represented within the SPAA. Other organisations typically had a single representative as a member of the SPAA and such organisations included the local professional football club, Casetown Voluntary Services, the local School Sport Partnership and the regional County Sport Partnership. Members of the SPAA also had different respective positions within their own organisational hierarchies with some undertaking managerial and strategic roles whilst others had roles that were more related to direct service provision.

Amongst the members of the SPAA, there was general consensus regarding the principle aim to increase levels of physical activity among the local population. However, it was in the specification of more detailed objectives that differences between members were apparent. In an interview the chairperson of the SPAA, for example, spoke of the important but 'controversial' process of trying to reach consensus: 'somewhere along the line, we have to agree some sort of ... series of objectives'. While there is widespread recognition of the importance of shared aims (Powell et al. 2001), previous research has identified that performance management frameworks imposed on different sectors by central government have impeded collaboration. Within County Sport Partnerships in particular, Philpotts et al. (2011, p. 273) found that 'increasing dominance of a government imposed target driven culture had led in some cases to stultification of the delivery of sport policy at local level'. Moreover, as Snape's (2003) more general review of health and local government partnerships suggested, the effects of differences between the performance management frameworks for Casetown City Council and Casetown PCT staff were a particular concern. Staff from the City Council regularly emphasised in interviews and in meetings the importance of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) target that was based upon increasing regular, three-times weekly participation in physical activity.



Although not as strongly voiced in meetings, interviews with the PCT emphasised their alternative 'health promotion point of view [in which] we like to see sort of some sort of recognition of inequalities and not necessarily just going for the easy option of the people who are already active and trying to get them more'. That health members had a focus on more nebulous outcomes has also been noted elsewhere by Davies (2009).

The different perspectives of SPAA members regarding performance targets was also representative of a broader division within the SPAA regarding the impetus provided by local authority staff towards increased formalisation of strategic plans and structures. The SPAA had developed annual action plans in each of its first two years of operation. As found in a broader study of partnerships and community strategies by Sullivan and Williams (2009), these annual action plans represented little more than a collation of the existing and distinct activities of the different members of the SPAA and, as such, some interviewees raised concerns that they represented documents that did little more than 'sit on the shelf'. Despite, or perhaps as a response to, these concerns, Casetown City Council appointed a new member of staff in late 2009 with a specific remit for developing a new three-year strategy for the SPAA. The resultant strategy planning process brought different perspectives within the SPAA into greater focus with one representative highlighting in a SPAA meeting that the organisational instability within the PCT rendered commitment to the actions proposed in a three-year strategy impossible or worthless. Furthermore, Sullivan and Williams (2009, p. 176) highlight that the adoption of rational planning processes more generally tend to sit 'uneasily alongside ... personal interactions and negotiation between partners [that can] generate sufficient trust to overcome disparities in power, different organisational cultures and diverse motivations [in order] to enable collaborative action to achieve shared goals'. This specific tension was evident in discussions in one SPAA meeting in which a member from the voluntary sector explicitly questioned the need for a formalised strategy document. Alternatively, local authority staff stated their belief that a strategic plan was necessary to prescribe measurable actions as well as to demonstrate the value of the SPAA to the influential LSP and other prominent agencies. With there being no specific requirement on the SPAA to produce a strategic plan, this justification put forward by local authority members further demonstrated the predominance of a rationalist, formalised approach to public administration that Pemberton and Winstanley (2010) also found in LSPs.

Besides the planning process, reforming the membership and structure of the SPAA was another prominent issue discussed within meetings and interviews and is an issue that similarly demonstrates the challenges of collaboration. Davies (2009) and Perkins et al. (2010) both identify the practical imperative towards restructuring in search of collaborative effectiveness, although the latter authors highlight some of the costs involved in terms of 'effort and resources to be put into developing new relationships' (Perkins et al. 2010, p. 107). Much of the debate at the day-long

'refresh' event was centred on restructuring the SPAA. While there was some agreement on creating a new strategic group consisting of senior officers within relevant organisations, the variety of suggested proposals differed according to the extent to which collaborative activity beneath this level was to occur in highly structured partnership groups or more informal networks. The lack of agreement was recognised by Casetown City Council staff at the subsequent SPAA meeting. However, citing the rationale that 'decisions need to be made', local authority staff presented as a *fait accompli* a hierarchical structure based on separate and formal strategic and operational groups that was different to any of those structures suggested previously. The long-term implementation and outcomes of this restructuring were beyond the timeframe of this research; however Glasby et al. (2011, p. 5) are sceptical that such structural change itself leads to achievement of objectives. In this specific case, an even more pertinent point is made by Davies (2009, p. 90) who asserts that 'while structural reforms might ameliorate the fragmenting effects of self-reinforcing interest group clusters, it is arguable that joined-up governance will remain elusive unless partners can also articulate, debate and resolve value conflicts'.

The lack of open debate within the SPAA, especially with respect to the power relations that underscored the decision-making processes identified above, was an issue that was strongly voiced in interviews. Almost all interviewees recognised and valued the commitment that Casetown City Council made to the SPAA, particularly in terms of the provision of human resources in their secretariat role and in instigating specific actions. For example, one representative of the PCT, in discussing the council's contribution, commented: 'good for them ... they've stuck their hand up and said we'll do this, we'll keep it going ... I've got no criticisms in that sense'. However, this level of contribution was not possible for other members of the SPAA who cited lack of financial resources and incompatibility of proposed activities with existing job roles as constraining their involvement. In turn, the following view of a member of staff from Casetown City Council was representative of a widespread frustration within his organisation regarding the lack of commitment of other SPAA members to undertaking collaborative actions beyond attendance at meetings:

*I kind of feel that some of the key partners ... are quite happy to rest on their laurels to a certain extent and just let the City Council get on with it [and] it shouldn't be like that at all.*

Such problematic issues regarding resources and perceived contributions are by no means unique to the SPAA and have similarly been identified by Perkins et al. (2010) in their systematic review of the literature on public health partnerships and by Sullivan and Williams (2009) in community strategy planning processes. Within the Casetown SPAA, the different perspectives highlighted above went largely unexplored within meetings and led to the widespread perception that different members were not of equivalent status within the SPAA, a facet that Hardy et al.

(2000) believe to be important in effective collaboration. Instead and as a result, a form of 'ritualized debate' (Innes and Booher 2010, p. 97) determined by the power of the local authority predominated in meetings as one interviewee recounted:

*The council are in charge and I think they don't always want to be but they just are, which means that everything seems to happen their way and then they tell everyone what they are doing and everyone else sits and listens and doesn't have time to talk about what they're doing and goes away and does their own thing anyway.*

In one sense, it was the exercise of what Lukes (2005) would identify as the second dimension, or more covert, power on behalf of the local authority that kept opportunities for more open debate off the agenda of SPAA meetings. However, as the following quote demonstrates, the exercise of local authority power in specific instances had more overarching consequences in that other members of the SPAA recognised that it would be difficult, or pointless, to pursue their own interests given the strategically selective context of the SPAA itself:

*I don't think people really feel like what they say is going to get listened to anyway or taken on board by the people who are going to write the actual [plans] in the end anyway. So you kind of think 'well this is paying a bit of lip service to what I think and probably not actually going to be included in [the plans] anyway'.*

As Matka et al. (2002) also identify with respect to Health Action Zone partnerships, the unresolved power differentials did 'take their toll' within the SPAA. Besides the disillusionment demonstrated in the preceding quotations by individuals otherwise committed to the idea of collaboration, there were a number of examples of both new and relatively longstanding members of the SPAA either disengaging from active participation or withdrawing from the partnership entirely.

Overall, the research points to the SPAA being a collaboration that was ineffective, if not dysfunctional. Even supposed achievements of the SPAA were called into question by one interviewee who explained his view that 'what happens is they pretend that it's because of [the SPAA], but it's not. All of the projects would have happened anyway'. Furthermore, some Casetown City Council staff were also prepared in private to voice a different perspective to their organisation's public positivity regarding the SPAA, with one describing it as 'somewhat broken'. The preceding account points to collaboration within the SPAA being impeded by institutionalised modes of operation both within the organisations that were represented and in the practices within the SPAA itself. Attempts to develop the SPAA, through formalised planning or changes to structure that were pushed through by various types of exercise of power on behalf of Casetown City Council, merely served to reinforce these impediments to effective collaboration. As one

interviewee put it, the ingrained practices of the SPAA did not 'allow any exploration of how the group could be working differently'.

### **Alternative collaborative futures and challenges**

The lack of open discussion within the SPAA, particularly with regard to its reform, did not mean that individual members did not hold alternative conceptions as to how collaboration could be improved. In fact, such ideas were a common and significant point of discussion within most interviews, which indicates a degree of reflectivity which Huxham and Vangen (2005) suggest is essential for improving collaborative practice. Although these ideas covered an array of issues, collectively they can be drawn together into an alternative conceptualisation of collaboration within the SPAA. The coherence with which this vision integrates a variety of ideas and perspectives as to the development of the SPAA only serves to heighten its potential. Nevertheless, there remain significant barriers impeding such a reorientation of collaborative practice. Both the potential for alternative collaborative practices and the difficulties faced in developing such practices will be considered throughout this section.

A common suggestion across interviewees was the expansion of the membership of the SPAA. This viewpoint was widely held across the existing membership of the SPAA, including, for example, those in existing positions of power such as a senior member of Casetown City Council staff who spoke of the 'added value' that she felt could be gained from a diversified membership. Those interviewees offering specific suggestions for diversification commonly identified potential member organisations from the private and voluntary sectors as well as organisations with a broader remit than sport. Interviewees also indicated a wish to have a greater number of specific representatives with a role in direct service provision as members of the group. In a comment that has wider resonance given the Coalition policies to encourage new providers of public services, one interviewee noted that newly emergent agencies in the education sector could have been encouraged to become members of the SPAA. Reflecting the views and experience of Huxham and Vangen (2005), the inclusion of new members certainly held the promise of introducing new collaborative dynamics which could alleviate the inertia which was present in the SPAA. However, these same authors identify the common difficulties of attracting new collaborative partners. In the specific case study, it was recognised that changes to the longstanding practices of the SPAA, for example in terms of meeting times, would have to be made to enable voluntary sector organisations to become members. In the broader context, attracting members with broader remits might be challenging when sport and physical activity is often a marginal and misunderstood concern in other policy sectors (Houlihan and Lindsey 2012).

Qualifying the widespread support for wider membership, one interviewee expressed concern that it would inhibit the achievement of consensus and make it 'ultimately

very difficult to make any kind of decision'. This viewpoint is supplemented by Wang's (2011) contention regarding the difficulties of strategy development in LSPs with large memberships. Koopenjam (2008) also suggests that searching for consensus may lead to the suppression of views and entrenching of existing power relations. Significantly, the potential consequences of wider membership are framed differently by Innes and Booher (2010, pp. 93-94) who suggest that:

*Diverse stakeholders ensure that difficult questions get addressed. In many cases entirely new approaches and ways of thinking may be needed. A diverse and conflictual group trying to reach agreement often comes up with ideas that are not merely marginal adjustments but creative solutions to problems.*

This link between a wider membership and the potential of reorienting the approach to collaboration within the SPAA was recognised by interviewees who desired such a change. For example, one interviewee questioned whether the SPAA should be 'a kind of a top level strategy type group or is it a kind of ... open to everyone on the ground kind of group? And I guess you can't have both.' In line with this viewpoint, Peters (2008) suggests that networks concerned with implementation are more likely to be effective than those that try to both formulate and implement policy or those that focus solely on the former.

In expanding upon their support for the latter implementation-oriented option, a few interviewees argued that the collaboration within the SPAA should be reoriented towards a purpose in line with Sullivan and Williams' (2009, p. 176) 'learning model' of community coordination, in which diverse stakeholders come together to 'share information, expertise and experience about how to tackle complex problems'. Interviews spoke positively of those, admittedly limited, opportunities where there had been a chance to share information on the individual job roles of members of the SPAA. For example, one interviewee commented:

*I find it interesting. I think 'oh wow, that's what you're doing, that could help me with this and I could let someone who's asked me about that know about that'. And that is all really useful to me.*

Having valued such information sharing and learning, it was recognised by interviewees that offering further opportunities to do so would require a more general reorientation in terms of the SPAA becoming 'more a way of people communicating rather than it actually going off itself and doing something'. Nevertheless, as Sullivan and Williams (2009) also identify, orientating the SPAA towards a communicative learning purpose was not to preclude collaborative action. Specific examples, such as one where university volunteers were identified for a cycling project, were cited by interviewees as evidence that expanding the limited information sharing currently undertaken with the SPAA would lead to practical benefits. This example and others

involved collaboration between a limited number of SPAA members and, as such, differed from the dominant way of working that existed within the SPAA which was based upon requiring, at least superficially, widespread consensus between a larger number of members.

In line with previous comments, interviewees also recognised that a reorientation of the purpose of SPAA would also require significant changes in the way it operated. Meetings within the SPAA had largely followed a very rigid agenda that was determined in advance by the chairman and representatives of Casetown City Council. In questioning the effectiveness of the rigidity of existing SPAA processes, one interviewee identified the desirability of creating an expanded and altered space for collaboration: 'it's very difficult at meetings isn't it, but there should be a space for people to share what they're doing'. Suggestions by other interviewees highlighted the increased fluidity that would have to be a facet of such a collaborative space. One proposal was that, instead of ongoing meetings, each with a broad agenda, a series of learning workshops each orientated towards a different topic should be instigated. Rather than attending all SPAA meetings, members of an expanded SPAA could attend those workshops that were of specific relevance to them and representatives of other organisations could be invited where they brought particular expertise or potential synergies. It was recognised that this more fluid mode of operation could help to engender a level of collaborative vitality (as suggested in Innes and Booher's (2010) previous quote and by Huxham and Vangen (2005)) that was absent within the existing SPAA.

Moreover, the fluidity inherent in this alternative vision of collaboration could also help to alleviate some of the problems resulting from a strategically selective context which favoured the pursuit of interests held by particular actors within the SPAA. While broader differentials in power between various organisations would not necessarily dissipate, processes in which power was exercised, such as action planning, would no longer be a key function of the SPAA. Similarly, whereas membership of the SPAA previously required collective acceptance of decisions determined by the exercise of power in the various ways described earlier, a reformed SPAA would enable specific collaborative actions to develop between various smaller and more consensual groups of members. Such an approach is supported by Huxham and Vangen (2005), who advocate that achieving small-scale, but successful, collaborative actions amongst selected members can contribute to more ongoing processes of trust building, essential for longer-term collaboration. To an extent, these facets were actually evidenced within a small group of SPAA members who had identified their common focus on volunteering and had independently undertaken a series of small-scale collaborative projects. Interviewees outwith this small volunteering group commonly recognised that it was 'the best example of partnership working' undertaken under the auspices of the SPAA and for members of the volunteering group their success was attributed to having 'a free rein to do what we're doing ... being able to change maybe more than other partners

have' and being 'very fluid in what can be done'. The potential of replicating this model of collaboration was much discussed by interviewees, although, as identified previously, the formation of similar groups was not prioritised when the structure of the SPAA was reformed.

However, barriers to the reorientation of collaboration within the SPAA can be identified within institutionalised practices and values of local agencies and their representatives. The alternative vision of collaboration that has been suggested would not be compatible with existing rationalistic public administration approaches that individuals in positions of power within the SPAA appeared strongly committed to. While Sullivan and Williams (2009, p. 174) do suggest that 'the dominance of the rational planning model was not necessarily permanent' within the LSPs that they studied, they do identify a high level of resistance amongst public sector staff to any contestation or attempts to alter this model. Associated with a rationalistic approach, a senior manager within Casetown City Council also spoke of her desire to discourage any change that would not facilitate the identification of 'direct benefits' of work within SPAA. A similar sentiment, voiced in somewhat different terms by various members of the SPAA, was to guard against the danger of the SPAA becoming a 'talking shop'. It is of relevance that Philpotts et al. (2011) identify not only a similar concern within County Sport Partnerships, but one spoken of in the same terms and language. These views certainly do indicate a potential level of resistance against the adoption of an alternative vision of collaboration within the SPAA in which more open communication within more flexible forums could provide more indirect, but less measurable, benefits in terms of learning. Moreover, in contrast to the rational planning approach, collaborative actions would likely emerge more organically, be less predictable and it would be harder to attribute their success directly to processes within the SPAA itself.

Given the specific adoption of Hay's (2002) strategic-relational approach in this study, it is also necessary to consider the extent to which the broader strategically selective context would shape the possibilities of change to collaboration within the SPAA. It should be stressed that it was not formal hierarchical governmental arrangements that were necessarily impeding reform of the SPAA in the ways previous described. Even though the Labour government mandated the formation of various partnerships, Dickinson and Glasby (2010, p. 823) notably distinguish that 'central government has been less clear about how "partnership" should deliver the solution to all these difficulties, or indeed, what this solution actually looks like'. Similarly, in the case of SPAAs, the limited formal guidance offered by Sport England (2007, p. 5) stressed that there 'should be flexibility in how [SPAAs] develop' and that it was 'not necessary or indeed advisable to have a prescribed structure' that was determined nationally for specific SPAAs. In this respect, SPAAs differ considerably from Country Sport Partnerships, which Philpotts et al. (2011) regard as being enforced by government and its representatives. While Sport England (2007) did put in place competitive bidding processes for the limited funding available for SPAAs, it

has been noted elsewhere (Lindsey 2010) that such mechanisms had very limited influence on the local conduct of collaboration in sport and related policy areas. Moreover, in Casetown SPAA in particular, the representative of the local County Sport Partnership did not have significant input into decision-making nor did she, or her organisation more generally, strongly steer how the SPAA operated. The flexibility accorded to the SPAA to determine its own operation, and potentially reform itself in the way suggested, was only enhanced by the Coalition government's early removal of LAA targets that were the key priority against which SPAAs were to be monitored (Sport England 2005).

Aspects of the broader context that have emerged since the election of the Coalition government can also be identified as potentially hindering the suggested reorientation of collaboration. One likely feature of the more fluid collaboration envisaged is the increased importance of relationships between specific individuals involved in the SPAA. Even at the time the research was undertaken, dependence on personal relationships was a concern raised in meetings and one interviewee also commented that: 'I just think the nature of a lot of this work is just so transient and just, it's difficult and people change jobs and they change roles and whatever'. Such transiency is only likely to have been increased given the scale of the widespread changes and cuts instigated by the Coalition government. While the argument has been presented in favour of less rigid collaboration, McGuire and Agranoff (2011, p. 269) do caution that 'constant change can also lead to inertia as relationships between partners become increasingly fluid'. An interviewee from the Casetown PCT also recognised that the Labour government's market-based reforms in the National Health Service (NHS) were not conducive to collaboration within the SPAA. That Coalition policies for the NHS have subsequently stressed competition over collaboration has been widely recognised (for example, Ham 2011). More broadly, in the face of cuts in funding faced by organisations involved in Casetown SPAA, individuals and organisations would be more prone to a degree of protectionism that militates against even the least threatening forms of learning-orientated collaboration (McGuire and Agranoff 2011, Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). It is these aspects of the broader context that may diminish the chances of success of any actions that individuals may take towards pursuing the small-scale and consensual collaboration that has been suggested.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this study, as stated in the introduction, has been to identify learning from collaborative practices in order to consider the potential for improvement in such practices in the future, especially given the changes in policy direction witnessed through the transition from the Labour to Coalition governments. In attempting to draw conclusions from the case study of Casetown Sport and Physical Activity Alliance that are relevant across policy sectors, it is essential to take great care not to overstate the generalisability of findings from this single case. This is particularly



important as authors who provide substantial previous contributions as to how collaboration could be improved (for example, Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, Huxham and Vangen 2005) do also caution that choices of appropriate ways to improve collaboration have to be made according to the particular context. Nevertheless, Yin (2009) also indicates that utilising broader concepts and relevant literature in case study research is vital to developing 'analytic generalisation'. This recommendation has been followed in this case study through utilising the strategic-relational approach to underpin consideration of the relative influence of structure and agency on collaboration. Furthermore, other recent studies of partnership and collaboration in the UK during the time of the Labour government have also been used to aid consideration of the extent to which features of this particular case study drawn from the context of sport and physical activity may be representative of more common trends found in other policy sectors. In this regard, this wider literature has been particularly valuable in drawing attention to common features of the strategically selective context that have influenced the practices of agents involved in collaboration.

In terms of the strategically selective context, it is unquestionable that the previous Labour government provided significant explicit and implicit impetus towards the creation and development of partnerships, such as the Casetown SPAA, within which collaboration could occur. However, as the evidence introduced earlier from other studies suggests, the extent to which the Labour government centrally directed the organisational form of these partnerships may well have hindered the local collaboration that they were expected to engender. While there was, perhaps unusually, significant local discretion as to the form that the Casetown SPAA took, effective collaboration was also constrained by the ongoing inculcation, by the Labour government and those that preceded it, of new public management approaches of rational planning, performance management and the adoption of national targets. An overall assessment of the impact of the Labour government, therefore, would identify the contradictory influences on collaboration which in the case of the Casetown SPAA contributed, to some extent, to the collaborative inertia that was identified.

As was indicated in the introduction and further commented upon in the previous section, policy and economic agendas pursued by the Coalition government also create a context in which there are contrasting influences on local collaboration. There must be concerns that the scale of current spending cuts will undermine even the most effective collaborative practices. In the sector at the centre of this study, for example, central funding for a nationwide system of School Sport Partnerships has largely been withdrawn and, while County Sport Partnerships remain, the support for SPAAs remains minimal. Nevertheless, aspects of Coalition policies are consistent with the development of collaborative approaches discussed in this article. With central direction as to the form of collaborative arrangements removed, local impetus towards change recognised in this case study and elsewhere in the literature could

be orientated towards the development of more flexible, fluid and open structures for collaboration. Again in line with suggestions in Casetown SPAA, such structures could more readily accommodate the greater array of non-statutory organisations that are likely to become involved in the delivery of traditionally public services as a result of Coalition government policies in a number of sectors. The experiences from this case study also suggest that changes in the organisation of, and organisations involved in, collaboration would also necessitate and support an associated shift in the focus of collaboration, away from strategic development and towards sharing information, learning and undertaking bottom-up collaborative implementation. Again, this may be consistent with the decentralisation agenda pursued by the Coalition government. As a result, organisational forms within which collaboration occurs are likely to differ considerably, if they exist at all, across different localities in the future.

This local variation is all the more likely to exist because of the increased influence that local agents and agencies are likely to have on collaboration. On the one hand, some local agents may not provide the drive necessary to continue and to modify local collaboration. On the other hand, local agents in this study certainly demonstrated the commitment to the principle of collaboration that Sullivan (2010) believes to exist more widely. Lowndes and Prachett (2012, p. 22) also argue that aspects of Labour's modernisation agenda, such as both collaboration and performance management, became deeply embedded in the approaches of local actors to the extent that 'the Coalition's reforms will inevitably be interpreted and refracted through the lens' of such practices. Many local actors already have significant experience of collaboration within the restrictive context that existed under the Labour government. Given that the emerging context may present somewhat different challenges, what may be of increased importance in continuing to pursue effective collaboration is the ability of local actors to consider and reflect on the opportunities and challenges that this context is likely to present. While such reflexivity was demonstrated by some members of the Casetown SPAA, collectively and openly considering issues such as administrative approaches, resource differentials and especially power relations is likely to continue to be as difficult for local actors, as was found in this case study and previously by Davies (2009). It is only through local actors addressing and overcoming such challenges that the potential for collaboration can be realised. That this potential has not been, and will be unlikely to be, universally fulfilled does not lessen the need for the continuation and improvement of collaboration within fragmented local contexts.

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